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747 strayed while Soviet readied test U.S. believes Times report

Washington (Reuters) — President Reagan's spokesman said yesterday that he did not doubt a published report that Moscow was about to begin a major missile test when the ill-fated South Korean airliner flew into Soviet airspace last week.

"I don't doubt the report," said Larry Speakes, the White House deputy press secretary. He refused to say specifically what U.S. intelligence had learned.

The White House said over the weekend that an RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft was in the general area of the Sea of Japan at the time the Korean plane was about to enter Soviet airspace, where it was shot down by a Soviet fighter.

Mr. Speakes was questioned about a report by columnist William Safire in *The New York Times* that "our electronic ears told us that a major Soviet missile test was in its beginning stages" near the Soviet-Japanese border.

"As usual, one of our RC-135 spy planes was sent up to observe the test from a position well outside the Soviet Union," Mr. Safire wrote.

"At the same time, the Korean civilian jumbo jet wandered off course into the area."

Mr. Safire went on: "Preparations for the missile test were promptly shut down. As that mission was scrubbed, our reconnaissance plane returned to its base."

"The local Soviet commander asked Moscow what to do about the civilian jumbo jet about to exit Soviet airspace going toward Japan."

Mr. Speakes said the purpose of the U.S. reconnaissance flights was to determine if Soviet missile tests violated the 1979 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, which was not ratified by the Senate but which both Washington and Moscow have agreed to observe.